

## **Outhouses-Lehi's Best Kept Secret**

### **By John Knollin Haws Jr.**

Over forty years ago, I had teen-age friends at a canyon party up in Vivian Park in Provo Canyon. These friends were the most conservative and well disciplined humans that could be found on the planet. I never ever saw any destructive tendencies or vicious antics until we saw on the mountain a decrepit outhouse.

This outhouse was high on a steep angled slope about 100 feet from the road that went through South Fork in Vivian Park. It was still held together well and had cemented itself into the ground it sat from years of settling into the soil below.

Once we spied the outhouse, we climbed up to it. The teenage antics happened and eventually several female friends were locked into the outhouse and their screams could have wakened up the dead if there ever was any buried there. I remember, asking them why an outhouse would be built on such a slope and so far away from the road below. Well, all of a sudden the mass hysteria took place and the destructive instincts came out of this model citizenry. Yes it took everything we had to tip over this cabin of relief. What screams we had as finally the cabin turned over and went rolling down the mountain slope.

As I remember this occasion, I have had several nights of guilt, but the euphoria that was exhibited usually overshadowed the distress. As I began looking into outhouses, I found that so little was written about the outhouse by pioneer settlers. It was a subject that people did not talk about. As I have read hundreds and hundreds of journal entries and historical writings about the experiences, very little was written about their need to relieve themselves. In all of the thousands of photographs at the Lehi City Historical Archives, there is not a one of an outhouse.

The only outhouses besides the dreaded ones that we would experience sometimes on scout trips, or some parks were a few used in backyards and they

were used for tools and storage. Ron Peterson, had his outhouse neatly designed to hold yard utensils and I would help Kevin and Jeff with their chores and would go to the shed to get tools to accomplish the jobs Ron wanted us to get done before they could play. We would also put apricot pits on the roof to dry to eat. That was a fun memory for me.

I think I remember one at my Grandparent's farm in Cedar Fort. I might have even used that as a young boy. My mother was the youngest of 13 so I only went to their house when I was very young.

Pioneer outhouses were a part of settling. Once the pioneers had established their home and had their outhouse up and going, it brought a sense of being settled. I can imagine that the women of the day were very happy not to have to go out in the sagebrush, but able to be able to sit down.

I don't know if pioneer outhouses had windows carved in them or not, but in researching the subject, I found that the cutouts were not for romantic americana but for necessity. It was nice to have light to be able to function within the small area provided and a cutout at the top would make that possible.

Probably the most recognizable symbol associated symbol with the traditional outhouse building is the familiar crescent moon carved into the privy door. Actually, the symbol is an ancient one, and was a sign for womanhood in colonial days and on the frontier.

Outhouses of America reports, "It's male counterpart, Sol, was either a star or a sunburst design also on the door. Since most male outhouses fell into disrepair rather quickly they seldom survived; while the female ones were better maintained, and were eventually used by both sexes. Although you can find outhouses still standing with the crescent moon, the original meaning for gender identification was lost by the later twentieth century in most areas of the country."

I was told that you could judge the financial well being of a household by the

outhouse. One oftentimes heard the pioneers referring to their outhouses as “one”, “two” or “three holers” and that you would know how rich they were. Most outhouses contained two holes of Different Sizes! There was a larger hole for the adults with the big (you know what) and there was a small hole for the children. Most children learned very early not to sit on the bigger hole unless they wanted to fall in.

Reva M. Smith recalls, “Occasionally we youngsters used this little building "out back" not only for comfort's sake, but to hide in as we played "Hide and Seek" or to delay beginning washing the dishes. At times, we sought to evade our turn to fill the wood box. I clearly remember my attempt to escape a well-deserved chastisement by locking myself in the outhouse until I hoped my mother's disapproval had abated, only to find my reward waiting for me. It was a lesson I never forgot.”

One asks how they cleaned them out back then. The answer is they didn't. They waited until the hole became full to capacity, and then dug a new outhouse hole near the old one. The Outhouse was placed over the new hole. The old spot was covered up with the dirt from the new hole. As the dirt settled, they shoveled more on top. Most of the substance was dissolved or would be eaten by worms.

Switches were placed on the outside of the outhouses. The switch was used to get the chickens out of the outhouse and from under the seats. The pioneers usually had a few chickens shut up in coop. When chickens are left to fend for themselves they are like vultures and will eat anything that doesn't eat them first.

Vera Bullock describes the outhouses at the Franklin School. “We didn't have any running water. The outhouses were back of the school, one for the boys and one for the girls. (The outhouse was a) Well, a two holer, I guess; Built of wood. To guard the door it was built out a little bit to cover the door up if it was left open. It had a front on it that was built out a little bit. The boys' was a little bit further away. We had to wait until recess and then we would all race to see who could get in the outhouse first.”

Some of the names that the outhouse were called in Lehi are as follows:

- I can remember my Grandma saying she was going to visit Aunt Susan (the outhouse) and my Grandpa would say he was going to visit the White House (the outhouse).
- My grandmother called the outhouse the "Garden House". It was screened from view by a canebreak through which ran a narrow path.
- I always heard my older relatives refer to them as the "Little house behind the house!", The Library, and The Ol' Shack.
- "Mary Jane" ..my grandfather always called it Mary Jane, as a kid I used to think she must have smelled awful for him to have named the backhouse after her...I still call our bathroom Mary Jane.
- Papa's going to read the Sears Catalog. (which is another story that could be told)
- I will not include all of the names that are unbecoming to our ears.

The inside walls became bulletin boards to proclaim the names of a certain romantic duo or the names of new brand of seed or oil that the farmer wants to remember since there wasn't the abundance of paper like we have today.

We all love to joke about the Outhouse, but none of us would like to go back and not have proper sanitary provisions. The bathroom experience is an important part of our very existence. When I was elected to the City Council in 1975, Evan Colledge was the mayor. A third of our citizenry did not have municipal sewer services. Up fifth west and over in the Trinnamon Lane and up to the Third ward area did not have sewer service. Mayor Colledge took this project head on with the help of Loren Power, city engineer. (He is still the City Engineer after 40 years.) Mayor Colledge, single-handedly spent every moment of his life determined to bring to all citizens sewer.

Lehi did not have the money to fund such a massive project. Lehi City was able to fight for federal funds and other money to be able to ensure that all Lehi Citizens were able to flush their toilets without worry of flooding their yards. Evan

will always be a hero to me for his seeing the need and getting the job done even though it cost him his political career. He was a true man of courage. Today Lehi is able to serve many people because of the Timpanogas Service District and the Trimmaman Lane Sewer finished mainly due to the passion of Mayor Colledge.

But seriously, the Lehi Historical Archives needs an outhouse. It really needs your photographs of your ancestor's commode. Please feel free to share something personal with the world. I should have more time to talk but excuse me, I need to go and feed the horse once my wife gets out of the powder room.

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